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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this document is to highlight some of the difficulties associated with retrieving information on Iran using Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and several other commonly used reference tools based on LCSH. Four subject areas concerning Iran are identified, and their treatment in LCSH and periodical indexes is analyzed. The four areas are the land, the people, the language, and the literature. The document concludes with a list of recommendations to alleviate the problem. (Contains 14 references.) (JLB)

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Looking for the Right Words: Special Problems Affecting Information Retrieval on Iran and Related Subjects Using LCSH

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Looking for the Right Words: Special Problems Affecting Information Retrieval on Iran and Related Subjects Using LCSH

ABSTRACT

Reference librarians are expected to retrieve information on a variety of multicultural subjects and languages. Idiosyncrasies in treatment of these subjects must be identified if library users are to be assisted in an efficient manner. Peculiarities, inconsistencies, and other problems associated with the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH) and with several other LCSH-based indexes when retrieving information on Iran and its culture are analyzed in this article, and suggestions for their future improvement are presented.

Looking for the Right Words: Special Problems Affecting Information Retrieval on Iran and Related Subjects Using LCSH

A heightened awareness of multiculturalism exists among American library users. Therefore, reference librarians must become more familiar with retrieving information on many diverse cultures and languages. While doing research on Iran, I encountered problems involving terminology as well as inconsistencies in various sources dealing with materials on that country. Thus, the use of these sources can create confusion for the non-specialist including the majority of reference librarians and library users attempting to locate materials on Iran and related topics. Careful examination of the controlled vocabularies in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* [1] (hereafter referred to as LCSH) as well as in some commonly used periodical indexes such as the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* (RG) and other LCSH-based "Wilson indexes" reveals the many difficulties in using these sources efficiently to locate information on Iran. Therefore, a critical survey and analysis of the subject headings related to Iran and Iranian culture in these sources is merited.

Problems with LCSH associated with area and ethnic studies are not restricted to Iranian studies. Otchere recognized such difficulties with respect to African studies. Her book entitled: *African Studies Thesaurus: Subject Headings for Library Users*, is an attempt in rectifying some of these problems.[2]

The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the difficulties associated with retrieving information on Iran using LCSH and several other commonly used reference tools based on LCSH. Obviously, an in-depth analysis, critique, and evaluation of all aspects of subject access relative to Iranian culture is beyond the scope of this article. A comprehensive thesaurus similar to Otchere's may be necessary for the field of Iranian studies. The analysis which follows concentrates on major areas of inquiry associated with Iran that would likely be the focus of subject searching by the non-specialist.

THE LAND

Iran is in southwest Asia in the area commonly referred to as the Middle or Near East.[3] It is 636,293 square miles (approximately three times the size of Arizona). Iran is bounded on the north by the Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan (all of the former Soviet Union), and the Caspean Sea. On the south, it is bounded by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman; on the east by Afghanistan and Pakistan; and on the west by Turkey and Iraq.

There seems to be considerable confusion regarding the name of this country in various reference sources. Although its people have always called their country Iran (i.e., "Land of the Aryans") before 1935 it was known as Persia by most Western nations. The name "Persia" originates from an area southwest of modern Iran known as Persis, Pars, or Parsa (c. 6th century B.C.) which roughly constitutes the modern province of Fars (Arabic for Pars and thus, the name of the language, Farsi; see below).

Treatment in LCSH

In 1935 Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1941) requested that the name Iran be used as the official name of that country. The adoption of the new name was slow in most reference sources. The Library of Congress (LC) continued using "Persia" until 1950 (i.e., fifteen years after the official name change) when it was decided to switch to the new term, "Iran."[4]

In the most recent LCSH (15th edition) there is no reference to "Persia" or a cross reference from that name to "Iran." Of course there is a cross-reference linking the two terms in the LC authority file, however, this source is not readily accessible to most library users in their routine search. (LC authority records are available on microfiche.) Following my inquiry regarding the desirability of a cross-reference for "Persia", the Library of Congress responded: the Library "will consider the usefulness of adding the reference in the subject list also."[5]

While LCSH currently has no cross-reference for "Persia", it seems odd that one can find a cross-reference from a now obsolete term, "Northern Tier," to "Iran". This term found common usage in 1953 when on June 1st of that year, John Foster Dulles, then the United States Secretary of State, used it in a report about that area of the Middle East.[6] It seems desirable for LC to remove this obsolete term.

Another form of the name, albeit rarely used, is "Eran." This is not merely a spelling variation, but seems to be a legacy of the Sasanian era (also known as the Sassanids or Sassanidae).[7] LCSH has not established this form of name as a variant name of the country. However, there are cross-references under "Eranian languages" as well as "Eranian literature" referring the user to "Iranian languages" and "Iranian literature" respectively (see below). It appears more logical to either delete all references

to "Eranian" altogether or for consistency to establish a cross-reference for "Eran" as a variant name of that country as well. Table 1 compares the terms used for Iran in recent editions of four commonly used reference tools: LCSH, *Readers' Guide* (RG) *Humanities Index* (HI) and *Social Sciences Index* (SSI).[8]

Treatment in Periodical Indexes

The adoption of the term "Iran" instead of "Persia" was also slow in periodical indexes. It took the *International Index to Periodicals* -- the forerunner of the *Social Sciences & Humanities Index* and currently, *Humanities Index* and *Social Sciences Index* -- fourteen years to recognize and adopt the new name. From 1935 to March 1949 "Persia" was the designated heading with the cross-reference (see-reference): "Iran see Persia." With the April 1949 issue (v. 12, cumulation) the *International Index* began using "Iran" as the main heading with a cross-reference from "Persia" to the new term.[9]

It is interesting to observe the evolution and adoption of the new name, "Iran", in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. Prior to July 1943 it used "Persia" as that country's subject heading. From July 1943 to April 1945 (v. 14, cumulation) it continued to use the old name, "Persia", and began making a cross-reference under "Iran" referring the users to it (i.e., "Iran see Persia"). From May 1945 to April 1947, still reluctant to use the new name, it created an intermediate term, "Persia(Iran)", as the

main subject heading. Only after May 1947 (v. 16, cumulation) did *Readers' Guide* begin using the name "Iran."[10]

Wilson indexes do not strictly adhere to LCSH. Rather, much flexibility exists in creating controlled vocabulary for these tools. Like LCSH, these controlled vocabularies are not based on any theoretical model and a great deal of emphasis is placed on practicality. This observation is also valid in all the topics treated in the Wilson indexes discussed below.

THE PEOPLE

Iran with approximately 60,000,000 population, is a diverse and heterogeneous society. Iranians form the dominant ethnic and cultural group and are originally descendants of the Aryan tribes from antiquity (Iron Age). There are, however, other ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups such as: The Kurds, Lurs, Armenians, Assyrians, Zoroastrians, Jews, as well as some nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes like the Bakhtiari, Qashqai, and Turkmen.

Treatment in LCSH

Iranians call themselves "Irani" and this term sometimes appears in print. This term, however, has not been adopted by indexers. LCSH uses the term "Iranians" as a valid subject heading. A cross-reference from the equally common term "Persians" to "Iranians" is made. Another cross-reference from "Iranis" to

"Iranians" will be beneficial.

It is important to note that the term "Parsees" or "Parsis" is reserved for Iranian Zoroastrians who emigrated to India after the Islamic conquest of Iran (7th century A.D.). LCSH uses the former variant with cross-references linking the two versions.

Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsses, is a dualistic religion whose followers believe in two powers of good and evil represented by Ahura Mazda and Ahriman who are in constant conflict with each other. It is sometimes called "Mazdaism" and fortunately LCSH does make a cross-reference from this term to "Zoroastrianism." Although there is no subject heading in LCSH for "Zoroaster", the founder of the Zoroasterianism, it does appear in LC name authority with cross-references for the variant forms of that name.

Treatment in Periodical Indexes

The Readers' Guide makes a cross-reference from "Persians" to "Iranians." The other Wilson indexes are not consistent in following LCSH in this regard. The term "Parsees" appears in the *Social Sciences Index* with a cross-reference from the less commonly used variant, "Parsis." Inexplicably, however, these terms are not listed in the *Humanities Index* and the *Readers Guide*.

LANGUAGE

Although Iranians call their language "Farsi", the term "Persian" is more often used in the West. Another source of confusion is the term "Iranian languages" which is used in most reference sources. It is a subgroup of the Indo-Iranian group which in turn belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. This phrase encompasses several other languages in addition to modern Persian. It includes the Avestan language, the oldest Iranian language which is the language of the Avesta, the sacred books of the Zoroastrians and their pre-Islamic prophet, Zarathustra (Zoroaster; about 600 B.C.). Old Persian, already a dead language by 400 B.C.,[11] survives only in inscriptions from the Achaemenian period and mostly from the reign of Darius the Great (521-486 B.C.) and Xerxes (486-465 B.C.) in the form of cuneiform inscriptions in Persepolis and elsewhere. The term "Iranian languages" also includes Middle Persian or Pahlavi language (also known as Parsi language) and Modern Persian and its various dialects such as Pushto, the national language of Afghanistan, Baluchi, Kurdish, etc.[12] The following outline clarifies the position of Modern Persian among its other members:

Indo-European Languages

Indo-Iranian Languages

Iranian Languages

Avestan language

Old Persian

Middle Persian (Pahlavi or Parsi)

Modern Persian

PERSIAN LANGUAGE or FARSI, Pushto, Kurdish, Baluchi, etc.[13]

Treatment in LCSH

LCSH uses the term "Persian language" rather than "Farsi." It makes a cross-reference, however, from "Farsi language" to "Persian language." It also uses "Iranian languages" as the broad concept encompassing all the languages belonging to the Iranian group of the Indo-European language family discussed above. There are no scope notes differentiating these terminologies, however. To further add to the complexity of the situation, there is another subject heading: "Iran--Languages" (under "Iran"). Again, there is no scope note, but by looking at the narrower topics (NTs) it seems that this heading deals with various dialects of Farsi and other languages spoken in Iran currently or some time in the past (and not necessarily belonging to the Indo-Iranian or Indo-European languages). In addition, LCSH uses the seldom-used term "Eranian languages" as a cross-reference directing the user to the more commonly used "Iranian languages." This obsolete

reference should be deleted from the list.

It appears that a complete review of the subject headings in this section is in order to clarify the syndetic structure, remove obsolete terms, and organize it in a more logical fashion. This will also affect the treatment of "Iranian literature" discussed below.

Treatment in Periodical Indexes

Inconsistencies were found in the treatment of Farsi or Persian in the three periodical indexes examined. *Readers' Guide* does not use any term for the language. My personal contact with the H.W. Wilson Company confirmed this finding, for a search in the *Readers' Guide*'s subject heading database failed to retrieve any term for the language.[14] The *Humanities Index* and the *Social Sciences Index*, on the other hand, use both Persian language and Iranian languages as subject headings. They are linked by a "see also" cross-reference. None of these indexes use "Farsi" as a subject heading, neither do they make a cross reference from it. Table 2 compares the terms used for Iranian languages discussed in the above-mentioned sources.

LITERATURE

Classical Persian literature, especially poetry, is considered one of the richest in the world. Most educated individuals in the

West are familiar with Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) the medieval astronomer, mathematician, and poet whose Rubaiyat (quatrains) was made famous by Edward FitzGerald (published 1859). However, few non-specialists are acquainted with other forms of Persian prose or poetry and their influence on Western literature.[15]

The retrieval of information regarding Persian literature suffers from the same lack of precision and clarity of subject headings as discussed above in relation to Iranian languages. My observation as a reference librarian reveals that many librarians and library users (including Iranians) are under the assumption that "Persian literature" involves the pre-Islamic literature of Iran and "Iranian literature", on the other hand, deals with the literature of that country after the Arab conquest. A cursory glance at the chronological subdivision in LCSH under "Persian literature", however, shows that these assumptions are not correct.

Treatment in LCSH

Because of the misconceptions noted above the use of "scope notes" expressing the meaning and limitations of these subject headings becomes crucial. As described in the introduction to LCSH: "Scope notes are provided when needed to ensure consistency of subject usage by specifying the range of subject matter to which a heading is applied in the Library's catalogs, by drawing necessary distinctions between related headings, or by stating which of several meanings of a heading is the one to which its use in the

Library's catalogs is limited...."[16] However, scope notes are used sparingly in LCSH. Out of approximately 192,000 subject headings covered in LCSH, 15th ed., approximately 4,000 have scope notes[17] (slightly over 2%). In my examination of all the subject headings discussed in this article only one ("Pahlavi Language") possesses a scope note.

LCSH uses the language pattern discussed above to create subject headings for Iranian literature. This practice seems to be logical at first sight, for LC also bases the classification of literary works on their language of composition. A closer examination, however, reveals that this practice can be extremely confusing even for the specialist. According to Milicent K. Wewerka of the Library of Congress: "Iranian literature is literature written in languages belonging to the Iranian group of the Indo-European language family. We have added a scope note explaining this heading. It should appear in the next edition [i.e., 16th edition] of *Library of Congress Subject Headings*."[18] In answer to the question regarding the lack of cross-references linking these two headings, she responds: "The cross reference linking Iranian literature and Persian literature is not made on the literary headings. The link between these concepts is expressed by a reference on the language headings instead. LCSH has a reference from Iranian languages to Persian language. This practice allows a connection between concepts at the basic level. It means that we do not make references on the separate headings for literature, poetry, drama, fiction, etc."[19] As in the language

headings, the situation is further complicated by another heading under Iran: "Iran--Literatures." I have already discussed the extremely pivotal role scope notes play in differentiating these terms. The subject heading, "Iran--Literature" does have a scope note in the microfiche version of LCSH and this note may appear in the forthcoming 16th edition. There is also a cross-reference from "Eranian literature" to "Iranian literature." This heading should be omitted since no cross-reference for "Eran" is made as a variant under the name of the country.

Treatment in Periodical Indexes

The *Humanities Index* uses both the terms "Iranian literature" and "Persian literature" linking the two with a "see also" cross-reference. The *Readers' Guide*, however, seems to only use the term "Iranian literature" with no cross-reference for "Persian literature." None use the term "Farsi literature", neither is this term common in other indexes.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion demonstrates some of the difficulties in retrieving information on Iran and related topics using LCSH or LCSH-based indexes. Most of the problems associated with LCSH generally stem from it not being a "true thesaurus" despite its

application of the "symbols" used in such sources (i.e., BT, NT, etc.; since 1986). As Dykstra demonstrates in her excellent article "LC Subject Headings Disguised As a Thesaurus": "The fact of the matter is that the LCSH is not a thesaurus, not any more now than it ever was. To attempt to make it into one simply by changing the codes on the existing syndetic structure is both misleading and impossible to achieve...."[20] The main difference between a subject headings list and a thesaurus, among other things, is that thesauri by definition consist of terms which designate single concepts rather than subjects.[21] There are national and international standards such as the American National Standards Institute's *American National Standard Guidelines for Thesaurus Structure, Construction, and Use* (ANSI Z39:19-1980) and International Organization for Standardization's *Documentation Guidelines for the Establishment and Development of Monolingual Thesauri* (ISO 2788-1986) for constructing thesauri in which one of the most important features is the rules for establishing hierarchical relationships.[22]

Numerous other authors have also written about various problems associated with LCSH. Mischo reviews these difficulties in general and suggests some remedies.[23] Gerhan discusses specifically the performance of LCSH under the online public access catalogs (OPACs) retrieval capabilities.[24]

Another problem is lack of a code for subject cataloging. Reynolds recognizes the need for such a code. The Library of

Congress's *Subject Cataloging Manual: Subject Headings* explains "Library of Congress procedures and policies that catalogers follow in specified situations. This is not, however, a code...."[25]

Nevertheless, LCSH is important not only in manual catalogs. It also plays a significant role in automated catalogs such as the online public access catalogs. Tonta, in his article on LCSH and PRECIS notes: "as was envisaged by many librarians, transformation from card catalogs to online catalogs has not automatically improved the subject access performance."[26] In such catalogs retrievability is enhanced by such features as key word and Boolean searching. However, while these postcoordinate indexing systems increase recall, they tend to decrease precision.[27] Therefore, precoordinate indexing systems like LCSH play an important role in successful information retrieval. Mandel and Herschman recognize this view in their article on "Online Subject Access: Enhancing the Library Catalog." They note: "Comparisons of full text searching with controlled vocabulary searching...have been applied to a variety of databases and systems and invariably lead to the same conclusions: a combination of both is best...."[28] Furthermore, at the present time Boolean searching on some OPACs leaves much to be desired.

The Library of Congress has been cognizant of the shortcomings of LCSH in the past and has made an effort to improve it. For example, since 1985 "more attention has been paid to hierarchical

relationships, and superfluous or inaccurate references have been deleted from the list when found."[29] Specific suggestions have been made throughout this article regarding terminology and cross-reference structures applicable to headings concerning Iran. The following, then, is a summary of general recommendations that follow from these suggestions:

1. LCSH and LCSH-based indexes should respond more quickly to changes in terminology concerning multicultural and ethno-linguistic subjects.
2. LC should continue its efforts toward improving LCSH in general and in topics related to multicultural and ethno-linguistic studies.
3. Toward that goal, the syndetic structure of LCSH needs to be improved, more scope notes assigned to various headings, hierarchical relationships among subjects enhanced, and misleading and redundant headings deleted or minimized.
4. Wilson indexes discussed in this article should ideally use a thesaurus created based on international guidelines or adhere to LCSH more strictly in order to preserve consistency and facilitate information retrieval. And finally,
5. Librarians interested in retrieving information on multicultural and ethno-linguistic subjects need to be familiar with the idiosyncrasies of LCSH in these areas and communicate them to their colleagues in the library profession. This has been one of the objectives of the present article. Speaking strictly about Iranian studies, a comprehensive thesaurus based on

established international standards and preferably developed through combined efforts of scholars in Iranian studies as well as librarians would seem necessary if subject access to the entire field is to be improved.

TABLE 1

Treatment of the Country's Name

TERM	LCSH	RG	HI	SSI
ERAN	No	No	No	No
IRAN	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
NORTHERN TIER	Yes	No	No	No
PERSIA	No	No	Yes	Yes

Boldface type= Used as main subject heading

Regular type= Used as cross-reference

TABLE 2

Variations in the Name of Language

TERM	LCSH	RG	HI	SSI
FARSI	Yes	No	No	No
ERANIAN LANGUAGES	Yes	No	No	No
IRAN--LANGUAGES	**Yes**	No	No	No
IRANIAN LANGUAGES	**Yes**	No	**Yes**	**Yes**
PERSIAN	**Yes**	No	**Yes**	**Yes**

Boldface type= Used as main subject heading

Regular type= Used as cross-reference

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The Library of Congress. Subject Cataloging Division, *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, 15th ed. (Washington: Library of Congress, 1992). All references are to this edition.

2. Freda E. Otchere, *African Studies Thesaurus: Subject Headings for Library Users* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992).

3. The Library of Congress switched from "Near East" to "Middle East" in 1986.

4. Milicent K. Wewerka, Senior Cataloging Policy Specialist at the Library of Congress, Personal Communication, 15 July 1993. I am grateful for her cooperation in providing me with information on this and other related matters discussed in this article.

5. Ibid., 29 June 1993.

6. Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Northern Tier: Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1966), 3.

7. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th ed. (Philadelphia: Maxwell Sommerville, 1891), 573, s.v. "Persia." See also: Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1964), 1:4.

8. References are to the most recent editions of these sources.

9. *International Index to Periodical Literature* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1920-1965).

10. *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1900 to date).

11. Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1968), 21.

12. Philip Baldi, *An Introduction to the Indo-European Languages*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 62.

13. Adapted from: Ibid., [218].

14. Barbara Chen, Associate Director for Indexing, H.W. Wilson Company, Personal Communication, 23 June and 23 July 1993. I am grateful for her assistance in answering my questions regarding subject access to Wilson indexes discussed in this article.

15. For an interesting account of Persian influence on English literature see:
Hasan Javadi, *Persian Literary Influence on English*

Literature (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1983). See also: Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (4 v.) for one of the most authoritative sources on the subject.

16. Library of Congress, *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, ix-x.

17. Ibid., x.

18. Wewerka, Personal Communication, 29 June 1993.

19. Ibid.

20. Mary Dykstra, "LC Subject Headings Disguised as a Thesaurus," *Library Journal* 113 (1 March 1988): 43.

21. Ibid., 44.

22. Ibid.

23. William Mischo, "Library of Congress Subject Headings: A Review of the Problems, and Prospects for Improved Subject Access," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 1 (1982): 105-124.

24. David R. Gerhan, "LCSH in Vivo: Subject Searching Performance and Strategy in the OPAC Era," The Journal of Academic

Librarianship 15 (May 1989): 83-89.

25. Sally Jo Reynolds, "In Theory There Is No Solution: The Impediments to a Subject Cataloging Code," *Library Quarterly* 59 (July 1989):224.

26. Yasar Tonta, *LCSH and PRECIS in Library and Information Science: A Comparative Study* (Champaign, Ill.: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1992), 9.

27. Mary Ellen Soper, *The Librarian's Thesaurus* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1990), 62.

28. Carol A. Mandel and Judith Herschman, "Online Subject Access: Enhancing the Library Catalog," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 9 (July 1983):150.

29. Library of Congress. *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, x. As an example, in 1977, LC made a feasibility study of adding PRECIS (Preserved Context Index System). However, for practical and economic reasons decided against the idea. See: Library of Congress. *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* (1978):37:154-155. (Quoted in: Tonta, *LCSH and PRECIS in Library and Information Science: A Comparative Study*, 10).

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